

Portrait of a Lady: Kathryn Bassett Pardoe



On 6 April 1977, the faculty and students of the Theatre and Cinematic Arts Department of Brigham Young University were gathered for the Annual Drama Awards presentation. Halfway through the program, a lovely woman was ushered quietly into the theatre which bears her name and that of her husband. Almost eighty-five, Kathryn Pardoe spoke to the audience from row N in that beautiful voice for which she is famous--the voice so many, many students have emulated over the past half century.

Kathryn Bassett Pardoe was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, on 24 August 1892, to William E. and Kathryn Smith Bassett. The family moved when she was three, and she grew up in Provo. Her father hoped she would become a musician, and even paid her to practice, but from the first she preferred acting. A surrey and its roll-down canvas in the barn behind the house became her first theatre and her first curtain.

Kathryn attended Parker School and Brigham Young Academy in Provo and the Agricultural College in Logan. She taught at Ricks Academy in Idaho, then moved in 1913 to Ogden, where she attended Henager Business College.

She was asked to teach at Central Junior High School in Ogden, and it was there that she met Thomas Earl Pardoe, who was in Utah for a brief visit after his graduation from the Leland Powers Dramatic School. He stayed to open a studio, and Kathryn became his first drama student. At the initial interview Earl asked her to stand up and sit down; he then said, "You move like a cow." In spite of that, she married him in 1914.

She must have improved, because she starred in *Girl From Paris*, a play Earl directed for the Elks' Lodge in Ogden. Earl came to BYU to teach summer school in 1917, and President George H. Brimhall asked him to start a speech department at the school. At that time Kathryn had three babies, took in boarders and roomers to supplement the income, and did classwork to finish her degree.

In 1923 Provo High School's English teacher announced her pregnancy, and Kathryn was asked to fill her slot. The high school boasted a beautiful auditorium that had terrible acoustics, so Kathryn, at her own expense, made curtains to put at the windows and across the back wall. When Earl went to Columbia University to get his master's degree in Elizabethan literature, BYU President Franklin S. Harris asked Kathryn to head the speech department at a salary of \$50 a month. When Earl returned to Provo, Kathryn quit to have another baby; her rest was a short one, though, because she soon began teaching in the department again at President Harris' request--Earl's schedule was too heavy.

Kathryn helped with classes and began directing plays in 1926. The first play, *Brown of Harvard*, was staged in the old College Hall on Lower Campus. It was hardly a stage, but rather a platform with stairs coming up either side, rows for the choir, and a place for the faculty to sit. The next two plays were put on in the old Columbia Theatre in town (now the Paramount Theatre)--a better stage, but not without its hazards. In *Believe Me, Zante*, a dog wandered onto the stage and rubbed up against leading man Joe Jarvis. He kicked at the dog and muttered loudly, "Damn!" And the Pardoes heard about it from everyone--university administration as well as townspeople.

The Pardoes had to pay \$300 a night to rent the Columbia Theatre; even then, they constructed their own scenery and did all their own work. Because of this extensive cost in money and time, they decided they would have to utilize College Hall. They redesigned the whole auditorium, knocked out stairways, and built the present stage, 40 feet long and 20 feet wide, with a six-inch slope. There was no fly room for scenery; shows had to be done with flats screwed into the pinewood floor. All the scenery was built across the street in an old barn and then the finished scenery was carried across the street, in the front hall, up a flight of stairs, down another flight of stairs, and then back onto the stage. And the scenery wasn't moved

only once: the stage and auditorium were only available to the Drama Department after 5:00 p.m. because there were band, orchestra, and choir practices, and assemblies on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Even with all this moving, the Pardoes produced a play every month, plus the one-act plays done in the Little Theatre. This meant that scenery had to be taken down Tuesday night preparatory for the Wednesday assembly, reassembled for Thursday, dismantled again for Friday, and even dismantled again on Saturday because Sunday School was held in College Hall as well. And all the scenery was transported back and forth across the street each time.

All the sets were designed, built, and painted by the Pardoes and the drama students, plus the few who were paid the standard wage: 25 cents an hour. The Pardoes also personally paid for the curtains in both theatres, and Kathryn persuaded merchants to donate fabric remnants for the costumes she designed and constructed. Her day began at 8:00 a.m. and ended at 11:00 p.m.--still with a salary of only \$50 per month. About this time, the studentbody voted to give the Theatre Department \$1,000 a year for operating expenses. The Pardoes always returned at least \$500 of that \$1,000 to the Library Fund.

In 1928, the Pardoes moved to California because they weren't making enough money to live on. T. Earl was coaching at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Kathryn was under contract for readings for the Friday Morning Clubs and the Ebell Club. These readings were of full-length plays, cut to an hour, and memorized--and Kathryn portrayed all the roles. She built up a repertoire of 19 plays, and was paid \$100 for each performance. At the same time she returned to school and received her B.A. in 1933.

But Dr. Harris asked them to return, so they came back to Provo and BYU. T. Earl went to Baton Rouge during the summertimes to take over the speech department, and stayed on after the third summer there to finish his Ph.D. in Negro dialects. Kathryn headed the speech department at BYU, receiving \$75 per month. She was not listed as a member of the faculty until Howard S. McDonald became president of the University in 1945, at which time she received \$225 a month. Her highest salary at the University was \$4,200 per year.

Yet, the Pardoes themselves paid for the necessities and the extras. They brought guest performers and lecturers. William Butler Yeats, Ireland's foremost poet, came for a week; and the Pardoes borrowed a car from the city water man (father of one of their students) and showed Mr. and Mrs. Yeats around the city. Louis Untermeyer came, too, along with many others. The Pardoes sponsored a Jubilee and invited all the old players from the Salt Lake Stock Company. They gave banquets ~~for all~~.

They put on plays such as *Julius Caesar*, *Peg O' My Heart*, *Seventh Heaven*, *Yellow Fever*, and *Emperor Jones*. One of their beliefs was that if you had an enemy, put him in a play. It always worked! The enemy became a fast friend and a strong supporter. And the list of their students reads like a *Who's Who*.

Kathryn's first play at BYU was *Smilin' Through*, which she produced while Earl was in Louisiana. And she is probably best remembered for her performance as Mary, the mother of Christ, in *Family Portrait*, which was produced during the Christmas season for eight years. They stopped doing the play at her request because people were stopping her on the street and telling her she was Mary.

With little material aid and lots of hard work, the Pardoes built a department--drama department with former students throughout the world, speech department, speech therapy, debate, KBYU radio station, Mask Club. They established traditions too numerous to recount, and they stand as examples of what two people can accomplish.

Dr. Pardoe retired as head of the Speech Department in 1952, and Kathryn stayed on until 1968, completing a teaching career of 42 years at BYU.

She taught in the new Harris Fine Arts Center, but never directed a play nor performed on the beautiful, modern stage in the Pardoe Drama Theatre. A little like Moses, the Pardoes brought the department to the edge of the Promised Land.

Kathryn Bassett Pardoe is a great lady who used her talent and gave it away, not for remuneration nor academic recognition, but because of her love of theatre and of people. The influence of a teacher can never be measured. All we could do on April 6 was to give her a standing ovation . . .

Jean R. Jenkins
Provo, Utah

*Don't talk about the money -
neither here nor there.*

*It was "The Drama" and
what it did for students that
mattered -*